

THE IMPACT OF AGE AND GENDER ON THE LEARNERS' MOTIVATION AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS FRENCH IN SECONDARY EDUCATION IN FLANDERS

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Abstract

Motivation is one of the most important factors in the acquisition of a foreign language. A desire or a need felt by the learner is necessary to make efforts in order to achieve a certain goal. In the context of foreign language acquisition, the ultimate goal would be the perfect mastery of the target language. Learners who are highly motivated progress faster and reach a higher level of knowledge than the less motivated. A less motivated learner, once the communication needs accomplished, would tend to stop learning the language before he reaches the quasi-native level of mastery.

The aim of our study is to analyze the impact of age and gender on the learners' motivational attitudes and beliefs towards French in a secondary school in Flanders (Instituut van Gent). Firstly, we verify if the prestige of the French language has decreased in Flanders, as is sometimes claimed, and, if there is a decline of the language level, whether it can be linked either to internal factors of the French language or to the lack of motivation. We also analyze why young learners (12-18 years old) would be motivated to learn French and whether opinions towards French differ according to age and gender. In order to investigate these aspects, we created a questionnaire consisting of 50 items covering integrative and instrumental motivation features, which are closely linked to the learners' beliefs.

Our results show that the observed decline in the prestige of French is mostly related to internal factors and not to motivation: e.g. young learners seem to believe that English is easier to understand than French. As far as motivation is concerned, we see a certain lack of integrative motivation, especially among boys who tend to have a slightly higher instrumental motivation. Secondly, young learners seem more motivated than older ones. These observations can be explained by the beliefs of boys that expanding friendship is less important than finding a good employment. Young learners, on the other hand, are mostly motivated to learn French because it allows them to travel, to expand the boundaries of their social setting and also to increase the chances of finding employment after college.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates first of all, that the decline of knowledge of French seems to be related mainly to internal factors of French and not to the motivation of the learners. In addition, the boys have a higher instrumental motivation in comparison with the girls who are more motivated in an integrative manner. Finally, young learners are a little more motivated than elder ones.

Keywords: French as a foreign language, acquisition of foreign languages, instrumental motivation, integrative motivation.

1 INTRODUCTION

The adequate acquisition of a foreign language is affected by several factors. The theoretical models suggested by Travers (1954), Gardner (1959) and Carroll (1960) emphasize the necessity to recognize a motivational factor in second language acquisition, because the motivation of the students is one of the most important factors in the acquisition of a foreign language [1], [2], [3]. A desire or a need felt by the learner is necessary to make efforts in order to achieve a certain goal. In the context of foreign language acquisition, the ultimate goal would be the perfect mastery of the target language. It has been previously described that the motivated learners have a faster progress and reach a higher level of knowledge of the foreign language than the less motivated learners [4]. A less motivated learner, once the communication needs accomplished, would tend to stop learning the language before he reaches the quasi-native level of mastery [5], [6].

Concerning motivation in the acquisition of a foreign language, Gardner and Lambert (1959) distinguish two kinds of motivation: intrinsic or integrative motivation and extrinsic or instrumental

motivation. On one hand, intrinsic motivation is the desire of a person to get familiar with a foreign language and its culture. The principal aim of the learner is not the mere acquisition of the target language but the establishment of contact and communication with its population [2]. The students learn a foreign language to travel, to listen to the radio, to make friends, to read the news or to discover literature. On the other hand, instrumental motivation focuses on the practical reasons to learn a language; for instance to succeed an exam, to earn a lot of money, to get an employment or to be able to live in another country [7]. Gardner and Lambert (1972) and Gardner (1980, 1985, 1988) suggested the presence of a positive causal link between integrative motivation and second language acquisition, as opposed to learning a second language for instrumental purposes only, where no such link exists [8], [9], [10], [11]. In other words, instrumental motivation is insufficient to acquire a perfect mastery of a foreign language. In addition, the instrumental motivation is essential when there is a deficiency or a lack of intrinsic motivation [7].

According to Lens (1989), a high proportion of students in secondary education in Flanders are currently poorly motivated for their studies [12]. The lack of motivation is also observed in other European countries and in the United States. In Belgium, particularly in Flanders, Decoo (1982) observed a decline of the knowledge of French as a foreign language in secondary education. However, he does not specify the cause of this decline [7]. According to the literature, the factors age and gender have an important role on motivation during foreign language acquisition [13], [14], [15], [16], [17].

Considering the social and economic relevance of the use of foreign languages in Flanders and, the fact that there are, to our knowledge, no in-depth analyses about the impact of age and gender on the learners' motivational attitudes and beliefs towards French as a foreign language in secondary education in Flanders, we decided to examine these aspects. The aim of this work is to examine and to evaluate the impact of age and gender on the motivational attitudes towards French as a foreign language of the Flemish students.

The present study addresses the following research questions:

1. To what factor is the decline of knowledge of French in Flanders related?
2. Is there a difference between male and female learners in their kind of motivation to learn French as a foreign language?
3. Is there a difference between young and older learners in their motivation to learn French as a foreign language?

and the following hypothesis:

1. The decline of the knowledge in French in Flanders is related to several factors such as internal factors and motivational factors.
2. There is a difference in motivation to learn French as a foreign language among students with a different gender.
3. There is a difference in motivation to learn French as a foreign language among students with a different age.

2 MATERIAL AND METHODS

Participants

All one-hundred-twenty-six students enrolled in a secondary school, named Instituut van Gent in Gent (Flanders, Belgium) participated in the study. There were 60 males (47,6%) and 66 females (52,4%). Of all participants, 21 students (16,7%) were enrolled in the first year of high-school, 23 students (18,3%) were in the second year, 20 students (15,9%) were in the third year, 8 students (6,3%) were in the fourth year, 23 students (18,2%) were in the fifth year and the remaining 31 students (24,6%) were in the sixth and last year of high-school. The age of the participants ranged from 12 to 18 years. Note that the study was strictly anonymous.

Instruments

The motives to study French as a foreign language (FFL) were measured by a modified version of a survey elaborated by Housen, Pierrard & Janssens (2001) [18].

This version consisted of 48 items covering integrative and instrumental motivation features, which are closely linked to the learners' beliefs. The survey was divided into two parts. Part 1 included demographic questions regarding the participants' age, gender, year and field of study, native language, and foreign languages. Part 2 consisted of 48 items measuring on one hand the attitude and the general opinion of the students, and on the other hand, the factors of integrative and instrumental motivation. The integrative motivation subscale consisted of 5 Likert-type. The items of integrative motivation focused on: the importance of the understanding of oral and written press in French, of the expansion of the boundaries of their social setting, of the possibility to travel, and the appreciation of the culture, art and literature of French. Similarly, the instrumental motivation subscale consisted of 5 Likert-type. These items of instrumental motivation focused on the importance of French for obtaining employment, gaining money, or pursuing further education.

Administration

The researcher obtained the permission of the school, named Instituut van Gent in Gent (Flanders, Belgium), to use 30 minutes of a class period to fill in the survey. The purpose of the questionnaire, its structure and content, and how it was to be filled out were explained to the students. The researcher asked the participants to be honest in their answers. They were also informed that the findings would be used for research purposes only and that their individual responses would remain anonymous.

Methodology

We classified the surveys, filled in by the 126 students, using two criteria: age and gender. Then, we investigated carefully all the responses of the students to the forty-eight questions of the survey. Furthermore, we analyzed and quantified all the results, using graphics and tables, to determine the impact of age and gender on the motivational attitudes of the high-school students.

3 RESULTS

The results of the study reveal the following aspects of interest.

Quantitative analysis

First, there is a strong relation between the decline of the knowledge of French and the internal factors of French (summarized in Table 1). In other words, the decrease of the knowledge of French is directly related to the difficulty of the French language and is not related to the motivation of the students.

We observed that the majority of the females (98%) and the males (67%) responded that French is a beautiful language. However, for other criteria (Table 1), we have not observed this overwhelmingly positive attitude. According to 56% of the female students and 46% of the male students, French is not a trendy language and the students do not feel great sympathy for the French population. All these criteria could explain less interest for French language. Thus, the decline of the prestige of French seems to be primarily related to internal factors of French. In addition, this decline seems also related to the fact that students feel that English is easier to understand than French. Here we can make evident the impact of English in our modern internationalized society, dominated by the English language.

Table 1. Analysis of the internal factors by gender.

INTERNAL FACTORS	FEMALE	MALE
French is a beautiful language	98%	67%
French is a modern language	56%	46%
French is a difficult language	49%	54%
The French population is friendly	56%	37%
French is easier to understand than English	47%	21%

The results of the first quantitative analysis revealed that the first hypothesis is partly rejected. The decline of the knowledge in French in Flanders is mostly related to internal factors and not only to motivation.

Second, the results reveal that there is a relation between the kind of motivation and the gender of the students.

Our results reveal that there is a significant difference between males and females in the reasons who motivate them most to acquire French as a foreign language (Table 2. & Table 3.). Female students have a higher integrative motivation to learn French in comparison with male students who have more an instrumental motivation.

The main purpose of female students goes beyond the mere mastery of French. They are more motivated in an integrative way: 87% of the female students really want to get in contact with the people who speak that language and communicate with them. The knowledge of French enables them to expand the boundaries of their social setting.

Table 2. Analysis of the motives to learn French by females.

	MOTIVES TO LEARN FRENCH	FEMALE	Type of motivation
1	To expand the boundaries of the social setting	87%	Integrative
2	To find a good employment	86%	Instrumental
3	To be able to travel	77%	Integrative
4	To obtain good grades at school	76%	Instrumental
5	To be able to work and live in Belgium	68%	Instrumental
6	To be able to understand written and oral press	64%	Integrative
7	To be able to read French literature	44%	Integrative
8	To become an important person in the future	43%	Instrumental
9	To earn a lot of money in the future	42%	Instrumental
10	To be able to listen to the French radio stations	33%	Integrative

However, we observed that the majority of the male students (78%) are more motivated in an instrumental way (Table 3.): the motive "getting an employment" is more important than the ability to communicate in languages other than their own.

Table 3. Analysis of the motives to learn French by males.

	MOTIVES TO LEARN FRENCH	MALE	Type of motivation
1	To find a good employment	78%	Instrumental
2	To obtain good grades at school	71%	Instrumental
3	To expand the boundaries of the social setting	69%	Integrative
4	To be able to travel	69%	Integrative
5	To be able to work and live in Belgium	64%	Instrumental
6	To earn a lot of money in the future	63%	Instrumental
7	To be able to understand written and oral press	50%	Integrative
8	To become an important person in the future	46%	Instrumental
9	To be able to listen to the French radio stations	30%	Integrative
10	To be able to read French literature	26%	Integrative

On one hand, the quantitative analysis showed no significant differences between males and females in their instrumental motivation. We observed (Table 4.) that the average scores for the instrumental motivation were similar for females and for males. 86% of the females and 78% of the males agree

about the most important motive to study French which is “to find a good employment”. However, there was a significant difference for the motive “to earn much money in the future”, which seems to be much more motivating for males (63%) than for females (42%).

Table 4. Analysis of the instrumental motivation by gender.

INSTRUMENTAL MOTIVATION	FEMALE	MALE	FEMALE	MALE
	important	important	not important	not important
To earn a lot of money in the future	42%	63%	58%	37%
To be able to work and live in Belgium	68%	64%	32%	36%
To become an important person in the future	43%	46%	57%	54%
To obtain good grades at school	76%	71%	24%	28%
To find a good employment	86%	78%	14%	22%

On the other hand, the quantitative analysis showed no significant differences between males and females in their integrative motivation. Table 5. revealed that the most motivating criterion to learn French is similar for males and females, which is: making friends, for 87% of the females and 69% of the males; followed by travelling, for 77% of the females and 69% of the males.

However, there was a significant difference in gender regarding to the criterion of integrative motivation, considered as less challenging (Table 5.). For 67% of the females, being able to listen to French radio stations is not sufficiently motivating, in contrast with 74% of the males for who the ability to read and to get to know French literature is not motivating at all.

Table 5. Analysis of the integrative motivation by gender.

INTEGRATIVE MOTIVATION	FEMALE	MALE	FEMALE	MALE
	important	important	not important	not important
To be able to understand written and oral press	64%	50%	36%	50%
To expand the boundaries of the social setting	87%	69%	12%	31%
To be able to listen to the French radio stations	33%	30%	67%	70%
To be able to travel	77%	69%	24%	31%
To be able to read French literature	44%	26%	56%	74%

The results of the second quantitative analysis revealed that the second hypothesis is accepted. As far motivation is concerned, there is a difference in the kind of motivation to learn French as a foreign language among students with a different gender. We observed a certain lack of integrative motivation, especially among male students who tend to have a slightly higher instrumental motivation. Regarding to the female students, they are more motivated in an integrative manner. These observations can be explained by the beliefs of males that expanding friendship is less important than finding a good employment.

Third, all the results reveal that there is a relation between the motivation to learn French as a foreign language and the age of the students. Our analysis revealed that there is a slight difference between younger and older students.

Young students (12-14 years old) seem a little more motivated than older ones (14-16 years old). Young students are mostly motivated to learn French as foreign language because it allows them to travel, to expand the boundaries of their social setting and also to increase the chances of finding employment after college. The results revealed that the third hypothesis is accepted.

4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study is set out to determine the impact of age and gender on the learners' motivational attitudes and beliefs towards French as a foreign language in a secondary school in Flanders (Belgium).

The first question was about whether the decline of the knowledge of French as a foreign language is linked to internal factors of the French language or is only related to the lack of motivation of the secondary school students. The results of the quantitative analysis indicate that the decline is due to the fact that French is considered as a very difficult and complex language. The students have little sympathy for the French population due to the complex sociolinguistic situation in Belgium. These results indicate that students need to feel a certain attraction towards French to be enough motivated to learn it. These results are correlated with another study that suggests an impact of the sociolinguistic and cultural situation on the acquisition of foreign languages [15]. Thus, study goals should be made attractive to students in order to motivate them more to learn a language other than their own.

The second question related differences in motivation to gender. The results of the analysis of the survey indicated that there were differences between males and females in their motivation to learn French as a foreign language. More specifically, the females were more likely than males to report that they are more motivated in an integrative manner. As Gardner and Lambert (1972) and Gardner (1980, 1985, 1988) indicated a positive causal link between integrative motivation and second language acquisition, we can deduce that the female students will have better results in the context of the acquisition of French as a second language [8], [9], [10], [11]. In addition, the female students, as they are more motivated than the male students, will have a faster progress and can reach a higher level of knowledge of the foreign language than the less motivated learners [4].

The third question raised in the present study, dealt with the age of the students and their motivation. The results of the analysis showed that young students were more motivated than older students. These results are correlated with other studies that demonstrated that the age factor has an important role on motivation during foreign language acquisition [14], [15], [16].

In conclusion, in this work we demonstrated that age and gender affect the motivation of the students in the acquisition a foreign language. However, this study does not represent a large learner population and further research should certainly complete this work. It would be interesting to elaborate a comparative research between students' opinion of different types of schools, and of larger population, to find significant and representative differences. In addition, further analysis on how to motivate students to learn French would definitely be interesting as well.

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